

How Do You Define 21st-Century Learning?

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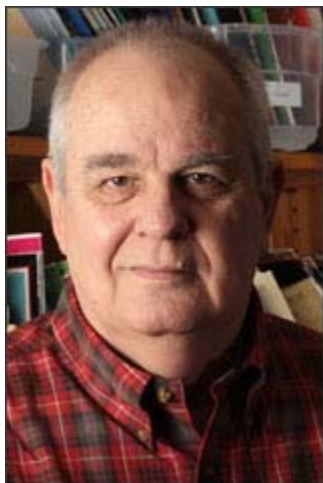
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The term "21st-century skills" is generally used to refer to certain core competencies such as collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking, and problem-solving that advocates believe schools need to teach to help students thrive in today's world. In a broader sense, however, the idea of what learning in the 21st century should look like is open to interpretation—and controversy.

To get a sense of how views on the subject align—and differ—we recently asked a range of education experts to define 21st-century learning from their own perspectives.

Richard Allington

Professor of Education, University of Tennessee; Early-Reading Expert



I'm an old guy. I've never Tweeted, Skyped, Facebooked, or YouTubed. Oddly, I don't feel the least bit disenfranchised by technology. I am preparing this response on my laptop, I use (though not much) my Blackberry every day, and I will e-mail this response. But I'm still stuck on fostering 18th-century literacy in citizens. As far as I can tell, illiterates rarely use 21st-century literacies if only because they never developed the 18th-century kind of literacy. I think we actually could teach everyone to read (the old way) and for the life of me I cannot understand why schools would spend funds on computers when their libraries are almost empty of things students might want to read. I cannot understand why classrooms have whiteboards but no classroom libraries. The research, to date, has provided no evidence that having either computers or whiteboards in schools has any positive effect on students' reading and writing proficiencies. But school and classroom libraries are well established as essential if we plan to develop a literate citizenry.

However, there is no buzz about books.

Barnett Berry

Founder and CEO, Center for Teaching Quality



Twenty-first-century learning means that students master content while producing, synthesizing, and evaluating information from a wide variety of subjects and sources with an understanding of and respect for diverse cultures. Students demonstrate the three Rs, but also the three Cs: creativity, communication, and collaboration. They demonstrate digital literacy as well as civic responsibility. Virtual tools and open-source software create borderless learning territories for students of all ages, anytime and anywhere.

Powerful learning of this nature demands well-prepared teachers who draw on advances in cognitive science and are strategically organized in teams, in and out of cyberspace. Many will emerge as teacherpreneurs who work closely with students in their local communities while also serving as learning concierges, virtual network guides, gaming experts, community organizers, and policy researchers.

Sarah Brown Wessling

2010 National Teacher of the Year



Twenty-first-century learning embodies an approach to teaching that marries content to skill. Without skills, students are left to memorize facts, recall details for worksheets, and relegate their educational experience to passivity. Without content, students may engage in problem-solving or team-working experiences that fall into triviality, into relevance without rigor. Instead, the 21st-century learning paradigm offers an opportunity to synergize the margins of the content vs. skills debate and bring it into a framework that dispels these dichotomies. Twenty-first-century learning means hearkening to cornerstones of the past to help us navigate our future. Embracing a 21st-century learning model requires consideration of those elements that could comprise such a shift: creating learners who take intellectual risks, fostering learning dispositions, and nurturing school communities where everyone is a learner.

Karen Cator

Director, Office of Educational Technology, U.S. Department of Education



Success in the 21st century requires knowing how to learn. Students today will likely have several careers in their lifetime. They must develop strong critical thinking and interpersonal communication skills in order to be successful in an increasingly fluid, interconnected, and complex world. Technology allows for 24/7 access to information, constant social interaction, and easily created and shared digital content. In this setting, educators can leverage technology to create an engaging and personalized environment to meet the emerging educational needs of this generation. No longer does learning have to be one-size-fits-all or confined to the classroom. The opportunities afforded by technology should be used to re-imagine 21st-century education, focusing on preparing students to be learners for life.

Milton Chen

Senior Fellow & Executive Director, Emeritus, The George Lucas Educational Foundation; author of Education Nation: Six Leading Edges of Innovation in Our Schools



Twenty-first-century learning shouldn't be controversial. It is simply an effort to define modern learning using modern tools. (The problem is that what's modern in 2010 has accelerated far beyond 2000, a year which now seems "so last century.")

Twenty-first-century learning builds upon such past conceptions of learning as "core knowledge in subject areas" and recasts them for today's world, where a global perspective and collaboration skills are critical. It's no longer enough to "know things." It's even more important to stay curious about finding out things.

The Internet, which has enabled instant global communication and access to information, likewise holds the key to enacting a new educational system, where students use information at their fingertips and work in teams to accomplish more than what one individual can alone, mirroring the 21st-century workplace. If 10 years from now we are still debating 21st-century learning, it would be a clear sign that a permanent myopia has clouded what should be 20/20 vision.

Steven Farr

Chief Knowledge Officer, Teach For America; author of Teaching as Leadership: The Highly Effective Teacher's Guide to Closing the Achievement Gap



Twenty-first-century learning must include the 20th-century ideals of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Sadly, we have failed to deliver on that promise. Our system perpetuates a racial and socioeconomic achievement gap that undermines our ideals

of freedom, equality, and opportunity.

As we study what distinguishes highly effective teachers in our nation's most challenging contexts, we see that education reform requires much more than lists of skills. We need classroom leaders setting an ambitious vision, rallying others to work hard to achieve it, planning and executing to ensure student learning, and defining the very notion of teaching as changing the life paths of students. What will make America a global leader in the 21st century is acting on what we know to educate all children, regardless of socioeconomic background.

Steve Hargadon

Founder, Classroom 2.0; Social Learning Consultant, Elluminate



Twenty-first-century learning will ultimately be “learner-driven.” Our old stories of education (factory-model, top-down, compliance-driven) are breaking down or broken, and this is because the Internet is releasing intellectual energy that comes from our latent desires as human beings to have a voice, to create, and to participate. The knowledge-based results look a lot like free-market economies or democratic governments (think: [Wikipedia](#)). Loosely governed and highly self-directed, these teaching and learning activities exist beyond the sanction or control of formal educational institutions. I believe the political and institutional responses will be to continue to promote stories about education that are highly-structured and defined from above, like national standards or (ironically) the teaching of 21st-century skills. These will, however, seem increasingly out-of-sync not just with parents, educators, and administrators watching the Internet Revolution, but with students, who themselves are largely prepared to drive their own educations.

Lynne Munson

President and Executive Director, Common Core



I define 21st-century learning as 20th- (or even 19th!-) century learning but with better tools. Today's students are fortunate to have powerful learning tools at their disposal that allow them to locate, acquire, and even create knowledge much more quickly than their predecessors. But being able to Google is no substitute for true understanding. Students still need to know and deeply understand the history that brought them and our nation to where we are today. They need to be able to enjoy man's greatest artistic and scientific achievements and to speak a language besides their mother tongue. According to most 21st-century skills' advocates, students needn't actually walk around with such knowledge in their heads, they need only to have the skills to find it. I disagree. Twenty-first-century technology should be seen as an opportunity to acquire more knowledge, not an excuse to know less.

Keith Moore

Director, Bureau of Indian Education, Department of Interior



Students in the 21st century learn in a global classroom and it's not necessarily within four walls. They are more inclined to find information by accessing the Internet through cellphones and computers, or chatting with friends on a social networking site. Similarly, many teachers are monitoring and issuing assignments via virtual classrooms.

Many of our Bureau of Indian Education schools are located in disadvantaged rural and remote areas. The BIE is working with various stakeholders to ensure that our

schools have a Common Operating Environment so that students and teachers can access information beyond the classroom.

Within the federal BIE school system, we must rely upon the vision and the ability of our tribal leadership, parents, teachers, and students to work with the federal leadership to keep education a top priority.

Diane Ravitch

Education Historian; author of The Death and Life of the Great American School System



To be prepared for the 21st century, our children require the following skills and knowledge: an understanding of history, civics, geography, mathematics, and science, so they may comprehend unforeseen events and act wisely; the ability to speak, write, and read English well; mastery of a foreign language; engagement in the arts, to enrich their lives; close encounters with great literature, to gain insight into timeless dilemmas and the human condition; a love of learning, so they continue to develop their minds when their formal schooling ends; self-discipline, to pursue their goals to completion; ethical and moral character; the social skills to collaborate fruitfully with others; the ability to use technology wisely; the ability to make and repair useful objects, for personal independence; and the ability to play a musical instrument, for personal satisfaction.

Susan Rundell Singer

Laurence McKinley Gould Professor of Natural Sciences, Carleton College

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<http://www.edweek.org/tsb/articles/2010/10/12/01panel.h04.html?qs=rigor+and+relevance>

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